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MEMORIAM

IN MEMORIAM FOR FR. WILLIAM LEWERS, C.S.C.

*Gerard F. Powers**

He would object profusely to my saying so, but Notre Dame, the Holy Cross Order, and American Catholicism lost a remarkable man in 1997.

I first came to know Bill Lewers as a Church social activist. He was director of the Office of International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC) and I was a newly-minted Notre Dame lawyer. (Always keeping the best interests of the Church in mind, he hired me to fortify the already healthy contingent of "Domers" at the bishops' conference.) Bill was not a Christian social activist with candlewax on his hands. Vigils, protests, causes, political activism were not in Bill's repertoire. Nor were self-righteous indignation and the politics of outrage so often associated with social activists.

Bill's activism was focused on helping the bishops' conference and Notre Dame remain true to the Catholic social teaching they preached. Bill liked to joke that he converted to Catholicism because of the church's social teaching, yet he soon discovered that he seemed to be the only one who actually believed in it.

At the USCC, Bill was instrumental in shaping the bishops' response to two of the hottest social justice issues of the 1980s: U.S. policy in Central America and *apartheid* in South Africa. On Central America, he helped maintain a difficult balance between the "prophetic" stance of an Archbishop Romero and policy prescriptions that reflected the ambiguous complexities of the conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua. On South Africa, Bill succeeded, after many years of roadblocks created in part by the ambivalence of the South African bishops, in getting the U.S. bishops to encourage Catholic institutions to divest from companies supporting *apartheid* in South Africa. He also led the effort to get the University of Notre Dame to divest.

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Bill brought a skill to social action that many social activists lack—and some even disdain. He was a social activist who could build, shape, and move institutions. He had a healthy impatience with bureaucracies, but he had the skill and the energy to work with them to help them remain connected to their original mission. At a time when many Catholic law schools had become Catholic in name only, he was an influential voice for strengthening Notre Dame's Catholic identity. His great pride of his last years was building up the Center for Civil and Human Rights, which he envisioned as a way to help train lawyers whose work for justice would be informed by Catholic social teaching.

Many people can build worthwhile programs and get institutions to do the right thing, but Bill's most lasting legacy will be the many individual lives he has touched. As a law professor, he did not seek renown as a legal scholar nor was he overly concerned to teach students to think and act like lawyers, though he took both seriously. Rather, his deepest commitment and major contribution as an educator was his role as a mentor. He had a holistic view of education as a process of developing a new generation of professionally competent, socially committed Christians. I was just one of many young professionals who were fortunate enough to count Bill as a principal mentor.

Bill was so effective at shaping individuals for the same reason he was so good at shaping institutions: his personal gifts. Bill was somebody whose views on life (or just the issue at hand) seemed to matter. He led a remarkably balanced life, working very hard on his many commitments yet carving out lots of time for nourishing his spiritual life and for his many, many friends.

Bill's influence, especially on the Holy Cross Order and Notre Dame, has been widely noted. Yet his greatest influence—and the thing about which he would be most proud—has been on a small army of people like myself who hold a deep respect for him as a mentor, a friend, a teacher, and a man of faith and integrity.